



# PUBLIC POLICY FORUM

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## **Report shows potential benefits of public health consolidation in Oak Creek and South Milwaukee**

A report released today by the Public Policy Forum suggests that the cities of Oak Creek and South Milwaukee could improve public health services in both communities at no extra cost should they decide to pursue health department consolidation.

"On the program side, our analysis finds that the sharing or consolidation of staff resources could help resolve existing recruitment challenges, enhance programming capacity and quality, improve billing and reimbursement, and eliminate redundant administrative functions," says Forum President Rob Henken. "On the financial side, while significant savings are unlikely to materialize, existing appropriations could be combined to produce higher-quality services."

The report was commissioned by the two cities last December. Since July 2016, they have maintained a temporary agreement under which South Milwaukee's Public Health Officer is serving as interim Public Health Officer for Oak Creek. The purpose of the study was to consider a broader spectrum of service sharing options, ranging from the long-term continuation of a shared Public Health Officer to full-scale health department consolidation.

The report begins by analyzing general demographic and health-related data in the two cities as a means of assessing their potential compatibility for joint public health services. That analysis shows that while Oak Creek is larger in population and is likely to grow much faster than South

Milwaukee, South Milwaukee's public health needs are greater on a per capita basis than those of Oak Creek, and perhaps comparable overall.

"These factors suggest that should the two communities pursue enhanced public health cooperation and/or consolidation, the need to design a cost allocation formula and service delivery framework that would recognize Oak Creek's larger population and projected growth would be tempered somewhat by consideration of South Milwaukee's potential greater demand for public health services on a per capita basis," says the report.

The report also considers existing public health staffing in the two communities, as well as public health activity levels and budgets.

"Despite their differences in geographical size and population, South Milwaukee and Oak Creek provide similar types and levels of public and environmental health services and devote remarkably similar amounts of resources and staffing to deliver those services," says Henken.

"While similarity of services and expenses is not a prerequisite for successful service sharing or consolidation initiatives, it can make it easier for communities to reach agreement on such initiatives."

After discussing a series of service-level, organizational, and fiscal policy considerations, the report concludes by suggesting that the two cities enhance service sharing under a phased approach that ultimately could produce full consolidation:

- **Phase I:** The two cities would move toward shared administration by formalizing the agreement to share a Public Health Officer; enhancing collaboration among their respective Deputy Public Health officers; merging Oak Creek's environmental health function into the existing South Milwaukee Environmental Health Consortium, which includes Cudahy and St. Francis; and sharing a Public Health Specialist.
- **Phase II:** The two departments would share administrative services and initiate joint programming in certain priority areas. Examples of administrative service sharing would

be shared information technology/data collection, billing, purchasing, and training. Joint programming might occur with regard to car seat and crib programs and public education/outreach.

- **Phase III:** The two departments would fully consolidate under a jointly appointed Board of Health. While the department would be administratively housed in Oak Creek, fully staffed offices would continue in both cities. The report presents a hypothetical staffing model that would boost nursing and environmental health staff capacity without an increase in cost. Among the additional potential benefits would be enhanced recruitment and retention of qualified staff in key positions; the ability to develop a nurse staffing model that emphasizes specialization in priority program areas; and enhanced programmatic capacity produced by economies of scale.

"The three-phased approach would allow elected and public health leaders from Oak Creek and South Milwaukee to immediately implement service sharing opportunities that would contribute to enhanced service levels and greater efficiency," says Henken. "Taking such action also would embark the two cities on a path toward full consolidation, though they would have the ability to stop short in the event that governance and cost allocation details can't be worked out."

The report adds that Cudahy and St. Francis could be approached to consider participating in a larger consolidated South Shore Health Department given that the two cities already participate in an environmental health consortium with South Milwaukee. The seven municipalities in the northern part of Milwaukee County similarly have formed a North Shore Health Department.

The full report can be downloaded at the Forum's web site, [www.publicpolicyforum.org](http://www.publicpolicyforum.org).

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.